

Righteousness neither By Faith nor By Works: *Retrieving the Biblical and Lutheran Theology*

Rev. Tibebu T. Senbetu
PhD Student at Concordia Seminary
History of Exegesis Department
St. Louis Missouri, USA

Abstracts

Some of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY) members' understanding of righteousness and salvation neither fits to Pauline nor Jaccobite teaching.¹ This short paper questions whether the Christians in Ethiopia today correctly understand the whole account of the Scripture about righteousness and salvation. It also analyzes what the Scripture and the Lutheran teaching have to say on the subject matter, because knowingly or unknowingly the full biblical message on soteriology have been neglected by some Christians, which resulted a confused understanding of true righteousness and salvation. Finally, it attempts to bridge the gap between the EOTC and the EECMY members' perception of righteousness and salvation based on the Scripture and the Lutheran teaching.

This presentation is not only based on secondary sources, but also on the writer's personal experience in the EOTC and the EECMY as a member and ordained minister respectively.

The EOTC and the EECMY Teaching on Righteousness and Salvation

It appears that righteousness and salvation by 'faith alone' through the work of Jesus is a strange to many of the EOTC members. Knowingly or unknowingly they rejected the notion of *sola fide* as the only means to righteousness and salvation even if they acknowledge that the Son of God died for sinners. Most of their teachings and sermons emphasis on the righteousness that is acquired by the great efforts made by the adherents in addition to their faith in Christ.² The church believes and teaches that when faith and work are both found in a Christian life, they bring forth salvation.³

¹ The EOTC is the Coptic Church which was administered by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria until the 19th century. The *Ge'ez* word *Tewahedo* means "unified", which is referring to the EOTC's belief that the divine and human natures of Jesus are unified into ONE nature. Contrary to the Chalcedonian Creed, which confesses the two natures of Christ, the EOTC strongly teaches about the *unified* nature of Christ. Read more on Alemayehu Desta, *Introduction to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Faith* (Indiana, Bloomington: Author House, 2012). The EECMY is the Lutheran congregation established in 1959 by the five-western evangelical Lutheran missions (Sweden Evangelical Mission (SEM), German Hermannsburg Mission (GHM), Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), Danish Evangelical Mission (DEM), American Lutheran Mission (ALM), and later the American Presbyterian Church joined the five-mission societies group). See more on Gustave Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: SFS-forlagate: Addis Ababa: The Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus, 1978). 105–126.

² *Ya Ityopya Ortodoks Tawahedo Bétakerestiyan: Emnat Sereata Amlekotena Yawec Geneñunat: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations* (Ethiopia: Addis Ababa, Tensa'ë Masatamiya Dereget, 1996), 68–70. For instance, the example of Abraham and Rehab is seen as a proof of emphasis on good works which is equally important as faith for salvation and righteousness. (James 2:14-26).

³ *Ya Ityopya Ortodoks Tawahedo*, 69.

They believe that God's grace enables them to balance faith and good works in their life.⁴ Some say that it is impossible for a person to be righteous by one's deeds and contemplate that righteousness comes from the merciful God himself through grace, however, practically they still tend towards works-righteousness and salvation.⁵

The concept of ጽድቅ (Tsadik), meaning righteousness, is linked to one's good work performed to others. When a person is seen doing good works for others, s/he is regarded as a righteous person. The good works are demonstrations of the members practical concern and physical support, which they can show in acts of kindness to the poor, which also shapes non-Christians' understanding of the term 'righteousness' in the society. These acts are treated as meritorious and it is believed that it would bring them righteousness and salvation.⁶

The EOTC also regards separation from the world through monastic life as righteousness. The monks and nuns are considered righteous compared to ordinary members of the church, because it is believed that they have disregarded this world and have come out of it to fully submit themselves to the will of God.

The members of the church observe the seven sacraments and pray to the saints in the hope that they would be assisted in finding favor in the eyes of God, so that they can be forgiven, accepted, and become righteous.⁷ Even for those who profess that they believe in Jesus, and consider Jesus' work on the cross as the only gate for salvation, still believe that there are many other things which believers should do in order to be righteous and be saved at the end. Such as, the seven sacraments and the intercession of the saints, fasting, almsgiving, visiting monasteries, confession of private sins to monks and priests, veneration of saints and all kinds of striving to shun the fleshly desires. It is in this framework that one can think of righteousness and salvation as something not fully grasped simply by 'faith alone'.

Thus, EOTC's presupposition regarding human performance playing a role in righteousness and salvation twists religious practice in the course of regular life as a Christian.

On the contrary, the EECMY's theology focuses on the forensic aspects of righteousness and salvation as declared by God on the basis of individual's faith in Christ and in what He accomplished on their behalf. The need to live righteously after getting the righteous standing in the sight of God is not denied absolutely although greater emphasis seems to be given to how one comes to salvation by faith alone.

It is often thought that Pauline soteriological teaching receives more emphasis in the EECMY. But it is hard to tell if justice is done to the whole of Paul's doctrines. Justification and righteousness in the EECMY is primarily the judicial act of the gracious God to acquit the believing sinner. As stated most often by the EECMY members what believers did before and do after conversion supplies nothing to their salvation. And the concept of righteousness is mainly understood as a public confession of sins and commitment made by individuals to follow Christ.

The EECMY differ from the EOTC's perception on righteousness and salvation in their rejection of any contribution from the side of believers towards achieving their righteousness and salvation. The church also refrains from giving the slightest credit to the virtue of believer's cooperation with God's grace that would contribute to their justification (Eph. 2:8-9, Tit. 3:5, Gal. 2 & 3). However, sometimes appears to not pay much attention to other texts, which instructs believers to obey God's law and grow in their Christian faith as disciples of Christ, who are re-created in Him through the rights of Baptism and Communion.

⁴ Marcos Daoud, *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church* (Addis Abeba: Berhanena Selam Printing Press of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, 1954), 10.

⁵ *Ya Ityopya Ortodoks*, 69.

⁶ Abera Bekele, *ትምህርት ሃይማኖትና ክርስትያናዊ ሕይወት* (Doctrines and Christian Life). Addis Ababa: Mahbere Qidusan, 1996 (E.C.), 319; See also, Berhanu Gobena, *መረሃ ድሀንት* (A Guide to Salvation). (Addis Ababa: Berana, 1990 (E.C.), 128.

⁷ The EOTC has preserved the *Anaphoras* (the church's liturgical texts) that strongly teach about the sacraments, specifically about the Eucharist since the fifth century. See Emmanuel Fritsch, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopicaz: "Qeddase"*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 4, O-X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 271. The seven Sacraments which have to be observed by the EOTC members are Baptism, Holy Communion, Penance, Unction of the Sick, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

Some young EECMY members have misunderstood the proper motto of Luther's profound theology, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, and become careless for moral life after being saved.⁸ In this situation, it seems to me more proper to strongly teach our members how they can practically live out their lives with all the many decisions that are needed today. We should not undermine the necessity of giving clear ethical guidance to the members in the midst of moral confusion all over the world.

Analyzing Paul's and James's Theology of Righteousness and Salvation

Apostle Paul and Apostle James do not contradict to each other, but both contribute to a full understanding of the Christian life. A careful study of Pauline theology of righteousness and salvation proves that Paul's reference to the "works of the law" as non-justifying elements is different from the works mentioned in James. 'Human works' for Paul are related to the whole Mosaic Law in its old dispensation in order to gain right standing before God.⁹ Paul denied the 'works of the law' for righteousness mainly because obeying the whole law is impossible and/or God did not set that as the way to deal with human's fall (Gen. 1:15).¹⁰

The Book of James do not talk about 'works of the law' in the same way as Paul, but he takes them as part of the responses of faith to God. Howard Marshall correctly notes that James's teaching is characterized "by a strong ethical concern, reinforced by certainty of having entered a new life, and also by the certainty of eschatological rewards and punishment."¹¹ When James demands works as a characteristic of salvation, he is talking about outward and spontaneous acts of love, mercy and compassion done in obedience to the spiritual law in its new covenant sense.¹² James is thus not accepting what Paul is rejecting.

The term πίστις mentioned in Paul and James is not identical. Paul writes on the sole role of faith in bringing one to righteousness and salvation, which is a *living faith*, while James, who likewise affirms that one is saved by faith, is making a distinction between a *dead faith* over against a *living faith*. This is why he further qualified the dead faith as something which can be even possessed by demons (Jam. 2:14).

Paul's rejection of righteousness by works by no means disparage the importance of good deeds that should be reflected in the lives of those who are already saved by grace through faith (1 Cor. 13:2, Gal. 5:6, Eph. 2:10). Paul strongly emphasized that faith has to lead to obedience (Rom. 5:1, 1Thess. 1:3). These ideas are actually identical to the Jacobean attack upon 'faith without works'. It is true that Paul did not preach of a dead faith. Marshall correctly notes that Paul in the later epistles affirms that no one can be saved by works but by faith, yet people are saved in order to do good.¹³ If believers are saved to do good, then their failure to do good and continue to lead a sinful lifestyle may cast doubt on whether they really believed or not.

Luther's Theology as a Bridge between the EOTC and the EECMY

In his teaching about the *Theology of the Cross*, Luther "presented a new conceptual framework of thinking about God and human creature" against the advocators of the *Theology of the Glory*.¹⁴ The Ethiopian Evangelical Churches' theology of righteousness and salvation should be developed and shaped by Luther's theology of the cross, because the Scripture tells that the Cross is the only way God wanted to reveal himself and reverse the fall. "It [the theology of the Cross] refines Christian's focus on God and on what it means to be human,"¹⁵ rather than focusing on human's ability to do good for God and attempt to earn His favor for righteousness and salvation. Robert Kolb appears to be correct when saying,

⁸ Most people agree that Christian's commitment to God and their ethical life within the society in the late 20th century is far better than young members of the church today.

⁹ T.R. Schreiner, "Works of the Law": *In Dictionary of Paul and His Letter* (eds.) Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 975–978.

¹⁰ Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross" (Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. XVI, 2002: Accessed from E-Reserves on Concordia Seminary's Blackboard), 443.

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, "Salvation, Grace and Works in the Later Writings in the Pauline Corpus", NTS 42 (1996), 347–355.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, "Salvation, Grace and Works in the Later Writings in the Pauline Corpus", NTS 42 (1996), 347–355 & see also pages 463–464.

¹⁴ Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross" (Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. XVI, 2002: Accessed from E-Reserves on Concordia Seminary's Blackboard), 443.

¹⁵ Ibid, 445.

The theology of the cross aims at bestowing a new identity upon sinners, setting aside the old identity, by killing it, so that good human performance can flow out of this new identity that is comprehended in trust towards God... When we attempt to use our decisions and performance to please God-or some created substitute we have made into an idol-we are taking them out of their proper sphere and laying upon them responsibility for making us God-pleasing. They break under the weight of this falsely placed responsibility.¹⁶

Luther correctly argued that believers' righteousness and salvation is the result of Christ's atoning work on the cross, which God out of His love, grace, mercy, and divine favor granted to people who have faith in Christ. Luther's theology of the cross correctly diverts our attention from what we do for God, to earn his favor, to what God has done for us and how we should be living the new life afterwards, because we have been already re-created in Christ to do good (1 Pet. 1:20). Kolb said, "... Children of the cross recognize the familial dimension of their new life in Christ."¹⁷ Through the death and resurrection of Christ, our sinful nature was defeated on the cross and God has imparted that victory when we believed in Christ. We are, however, living in the 'already not yet kingdom' and we are not completely dead to sin and live to God.¹⁸ The law has to remind us that we are still sinners and cannot save ourselves; and Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins so that we may repent of our failure to love, fear, and trust God in our lives.

In common EECMY members' understanding salvation is the work of Jesus and without faith in this work no one receives righteousness and salvation. However, for the biblical authors and Luther this faith is not a mere mental activity that is only related to human knowledge or public confession of Christ's Lordship, as many young members of the church perceive it today. But that that same confession anticipates works that flow from the same faith (Jam 2:14-26; Gal 5: 19-21, 6:7-10, Rom 12:1-2). Here we may recall what Bonhoeffer said, "Only the one who believes, obeys", and "only the one who obeys believes."¹⁹

For Luther, justifying faith is nothing other than the confidence that believers maintain in the mercy of God, which remits all the sins for the sake of Christ's death on the cross on behalf of sinners.²⁰ However, the same faith, which justified a sinner, also leads the believer to lead a faithful life afterwards. Since Protestantism was a movement that came out of medieval Catholicism and its main focus was to stand against the unbiblical notion of self-righteousness, but not developing antagonism between the theology of Paul and James. So, Luther's profound slogans, such as: *sola fide*, *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura* came into being as a counter to the RCC's notion of the divine-human cooperation to effect righteousness and salvation.

Luther clearly attacked the idea of divine-human cooperation in the economy of salvation. For him, faith has an object that is what God has done for human beings through the atoning works of Christ. Faith integrates believers into the saving event and makes them certain of their salvation since it has been achieved by God alone without any cooperation on the Christians' part.²¹ However, Luther still rejects the mere claim of faith and says that faith that is not fruitful or rejects in obedience to God does nothing.²²

The Lutheran's description of the two kinds of human righteousness is worth to mention here. The first kind of righteousness is called 'passive righteousness', which is the righteousness outside oneself and it is a forensic righteousness, which is imputed on believers as a free gift of God. This righteousness helps sinners to have vertical relationship with God.²³ It is righteousness that human beings cannot achieve in their own effort.

¹⁶ Ibid, 447-448.

¹⁷ Ibid, 458.

¹⁸ *Luther's Works, Lecture on Galatians 1535 Chapter 1-4*, Vol. 26 (ed.) Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 155-164. Cf. Gal. 2:19.

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, A Touchstone Book, 1995), 63.

²⁰ *Luther's Works, Lecture on Galatians 1535 Chapter 1-4*. Vol. 26 (ed.) Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 155-164. Cf. Gal. 3:13.

²¹ Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Faith, Systematic Theology" In *the Encyclopedia of Christianity V.2* (eds.,) Erwin Fahlbusch (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 267.

²² Read Article 20 on the Book of Concord about the proper relationship between faith and good works. Theodor G. Tappet, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Church* (Philadelphia, Fortress. 1959), 41-46.

²³ Ibid, 452-3.

The second kind of righteousness is called ‘active righteousness’, which is something human beings can and should act and achieve in their own effort.²⁴ This kind of righteousness must horizontally maintain human’s positive relationship with other creatures as God’s stewards and children.²⁵ Robert Kolb correctly said, “This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their own limits.”²⁶ It is this two inseparable but distinct kinds of righteousness that both the EOTC and the EECMY should retrieve from the hermeneutical principles of Lutheran theology.

Concluding Remarks

Confusion over the relation of faith and good works and their role in righteousness and salvation is found in EOTC and EECMY members. Members of both churches must perceive that for Paul, James, and Luther salvation is a divine past, present and future declaration of righteousness and of one’s acceptance before God, which is received by a *living faith alone*.

Paul said that human beings are justified through faith without the works of the law, but they are justified to do those works of which James speaks. Abraham was used by James to refute the wrong notion of the ‘nominal Christians’ who thought that salvation is by faith alone and that how one lives afterwards does not matter. However, it must be noticed that our doing therefore is the result of what God has done in Christ Jesus, but not what we are doing for God apart from Christ and his atoning work (1 Cor. 5:7).

A workless faith James classifies it as simple assent to religious truth of the sort possessed even by demons. And such faith is useless and cannot prove one’s salvation. Paul and Martin Luther by no means accept such dead and fruitless faith as genuine, though they never advocate for sinless life in the ‘already not yet kingdom’ state. This is why Luther insisted on the need to regularly repent of our sins for failing mainly to fear, love and trust in God.

Indeed, the reason Luther emphasized on ‘faith alone’ was that because the Medieval Roman Catholicism, the same as the EOTC today, misunderstood the Book of James as if the author promoted the divine-human cooperation for righteousness and salvation. Thus, to address to such context Luther needed to emphasize on Pauline theology, yet without sacrificing the full biblical theology of salvation and righteousness.

To the contrary, some young EECMY members have misunderstood the proper motto of Luther’s profound theology, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, and seems to be less valuing the necessity of moral life after being saved. In this situation, it seems to me more proper to strongly teach the youngsters how they can practically live out their lives with all the many decisions that are needed today. We should not undermine the necessity of giving clear ethical guidance to the members in the midst of moral confusion all over the world.

²⁴ Ibid, 453.

²⁵ Robert Kobe, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross” (Lutheran Quarterly Vol. XVI, 2002: Accessed from E-Reserves on Concordia Seminary’s Blackboard), 447.

²⁶ Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology” (from E-Reserves on Concordia Seminary’s Blackboard, 1999), 449.

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